

The Burned House

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Illustration by Dalton Stevens

ONE night at the end of dinner, the last time I crossed the Atlantic, somebody in our group remarked that we were just passing over the spot where the *Lusitania* had gone down. Whether this was the case or not, the thought of it was enough to make us rather grave, and we dropped into some more or less serious discussion about the emotions of men and women who see all hope gone, and realize that they are going to sink with the vessel. From that the talk wandered to the fate of the drowned: was not theirs, after all, a fortunate end? Somebody related details from the narratives of those who had been all but drowned in the accidents of the war. A Scotch lady inquired fancifully if the ghosts of those who are lost at sea ever appear above the waters and come aboard ships. Would there be danger of seeing one when the light was turned out in her cabin? This put an end to all seriousness, and most of us laughed. But a little tight-faced man from Fall River, bleak and iron-gray, who had been listening attentively, did not laugh. The lady noticed his decorum and appealed to him for support.

"You are like me—you believe in ghosts?" she asked lightly.

He hesitated, thinking it over.

"In ghosts?" he repeated slowly. "N-no; I don't know as I do. I've never had any personal experience that way. I've never seen the ghost of any one I knew. Has anybody here?"

No one replied. Instead, most of us laughed again, a little uneasily, perhaps.

"Well, I guess not," resumed the man from Fall River. "All the same, strange-enough things happen in life, even if you cut out ghosts, that you can't clear up by laughing. You laugh till you've had some experience big enough to shock you,

and then you don't laugh any more. It's like being thrown out of a car—"

At this moment there was a blast on the whistle, and everybody rushed up on deck. As it turned out, we had only entered into a belt of fog. On the upper deck I fell in again with the New-Englander, smoking a cigar and walking up and down. We took a few turns together, and he referred to the conversation at dinner. Our laughter evidently rankled in his mind.

"So many damn' strange things happen in life that you can't account for," he protested. "You go on laughing at faith-healing and at dreams and this and that, and then something comes along that you just can't explain. You have got to throw up your hands and allow that it does n't answer to any tests our experience has provided us with. Now, I guess I'm as matter of fact a man as any of those folks down there. I'm in the outfitting business. My favorite author is Ingersoll; whenever I go on a journey like this I carry one of his books. If you read Ingersoll and *think* Ingersoll year in, year out, you don't have much use for wool-gathering. But once I had an experience which I had to conclude was out of the ordinary. Whether other people believe it or not, or whether they think they can explain it, don't matter; it happened to me, and I could no more doubt it than I could doubt having had a tooth pulled after the dentist had done it. I only wish Ingersoll was still alive; I'd like to put it up to him. If you will sit down here with me in this corner out of the wind, I'll tell you how it was.

"Some years ago I had to be for several months in New York. I was before the courts; it does not signify now what for, and it is all forgotten by this time. But it was a long and worrying case, and it

aged me by twenty years. Well, sir, all through the trial, in that grimy courtroom, I kept thinking and thinking of a fresh little place I knew in the Vermont hills; and I helped to get through the hours by thinking that if things went well with me I'd go there at once. And so it was that on the very next morning after I was acquitted I stepped on the cars at the Grand Central station.

"It was the early fall; the days were closing in, and it was night and cold when I arrived. The village was very dark and deserted; they don't go out much after dark in those parts, anyhow, and the keen mountain wind was enough to quell any lingering desire. The hotel was not one of those modern places called inns from sentiment in America, which are equipped and upholstered like the great city hotels; it was one of the real old-fashioned New England taverns, about as uncomfortable places as there are on earth, where the idea is to show the traveler that traveling is a penitential state, and that morally and physically the best place for him is home. The landlord brought me a kind of supper, with his hat on and a pipe in his mouth. The room was chilly; but when I asked for a fire, he said he guessed he could n't go out to the wood-pile till morning. There was nothing else to do when I had eaten my supper but to go outside, both to get the smell of the lamp out of my nose and to warm myself by a short walk.

"As I did not know the country well, I did not mean to go far. But although it was an overcast night, with a high northeast wind and an occasional flurry of rain, the moon was up, and even concealed by clouds as it was, it yet lit the night with a kind of twilight gray, not vivid, like the open moonlight, but good enough to see some distance. On account of this I prolonged my stroll, and kept walking on and on till I was a considerable way from the village, and in a region as lonely as anywhere in the State. Great trees and shrubs bordered the road, and many feet below was a mountain stream. What with the passion of the wind pouring

through the high trees and the shout of the water racing among the boulders, it seemed to me sometimes like the noise of a crowd of people, and two or three times I turned to see if a crowd might be out after me, well as I knew that no crowd could be there. Sometimes the branches of the trees became so thick that I was walking as if in a black pit, unable to see my hand close to my face. Then, coming out from the tunnel of branches, I would step once more into a gray clearness which opened the road and surrounding country a good way on all sides.

"I suppose it might be some three quarters of an hour I had been walking when I came to a fork of the road. One branch ran downward, getting almost on a level with the bed of the torrent. The other mounted in a steep hill, and this, after a little idle debating, I decided to follow. After I had climbed for more than half a mile, thinking that if I should happen to lose track of one of the landmarks I should be very badly lost, the path—for it was now no more than that—curved, and I came out on a broad plateau. There, to my astonishment, I saw a house. It was a good-sized wooden house, three stories high, with a piazza round two sides of it, and from the elevation on which it stood it commanded a far stretch of country. There were a few great trees at a little distance from the house, and behind it, a stone's-throw away, was a clump of bushes. Still, it looked lonely and stark, offering its four sides unprotected to the winds. For all that, I was very glad to see it. 'It does not matter now,' I thought, 'whether I have lost my way or not. The house people will set me right.'

"But when I came up to it, I found that it was, to all appearance, uninhabited. The shutters were closed on all the windows; there was not a spark of light anywhere. There was something about it, something sinister and barren, that gave me the kind of shiver you have at the door of a room where you know that a dead man lies inside, or if you get thinking hard about dropping over the rail into



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that black waste of waters out there. This feeling, you know, is n't altogether unpleasant; you relish all the better your present security. It was the same with me standing before that house. I was not *really* scared. I was alone up here, miles from any kind of help, at the mercy of whoever might be lurking behind the shutters of that sullen house; but I felt that by all the chances I was perfectly alone and safe. My sensation of the uncanny was due to the effect on the nerves produced by wild scenery and the unexpected sight of a house in such a very lonely situation. Thus I reasoned, and instead of following the road farther, I walked over the grass till I came to a stone wall perhaps two hundred and fifty yards in front of the house, and rested my arms on it, looking forth at the scene.

"On the crests of the hills far away a strange light lingered, like the first touch of dawn in the sky on a rainy morning or the last glimpse of twilight before night comes. Between me and the hills was a wide stretch of open country. On my right hand was an apple-orchard, and I observed that a stile had been made in the wall of piled stones to enable the house people to go back and forth.

"Now, after I had been there leaning on the wall some considerable time, I saw a man coming toward me through the orchard. He was walking with a good, free stride, and as he drew nearer I could see that he was a tall, sinewy fellow between twenty-five and thirty, with a shaven face, wearing the slouch-hat of that country, a dark woolen shirt, and high boots. When he reached the stile and began climbing over it, I bade him good night in neighborly fashion. He made no reply, but he looked me straight in the face, and the look gave me a qualm. Not that it was an evil face, mind you,—it was a handsome, serious face,—but it was ravaged by some terrible passion: stealth was on it, ruthlessness, and a deadly resolution, and at the same time such a look as a man driven by some uncontrollable power might throw on surrounding things, asking for comprehension and mercy. It was

impossible for me to resent his churlishness, his thoughts were so certainly elsewhere. I doubt if he even saw me.

"He could not have gone by more than a quarter of a minute when I turned to look after him. He had disappeared. The plateau lay bare before me, and it seemed impossible that even if he had sprinted like an athlete he could have got inside the house in so little time. But I have always made it a rule to attribute what I cannot understand to natural causes that I have failed to observe. I said to myself that no doubt the man had gone back into the orchard by some other opening in the wall lower down, or there might be some flaw in my vision owing to the uncertain and distorting light.

"But even as I continued to look toward the house, leaning my back now against the wall, I noticed that there were lights springing up in the windows behind the shutters. They were flickering lights, now bright, now dim, and had a ruddy glow like firelight. Before I had looked long, I became convinced that it was indeed firelight: the house was on fire. Black smoke began to pour from the roof; the red sparks flew in the wind. Then at a window above the roof of the piazza the shutters were thrown open, and I heard a woman shriek. I ran toward the house as hard as I could, and when I drew near I could see her plainly.

"She was a young woman; her hair fell in disorder over her white nightgown. She stretched out her bare arms, screaming. I saw a man come behind and seize her. But they were caught in a trap. The flames were licking round the windows, and the smoke was killing them. Even now the part of the house where they stood was caving in.

"Appalled by this horrible tragedy, which had thus suddenly risen before me, I made my way still nearer the house, thinking that if the two could struggle to the side of the house not bounded by the piazza they might jump, and I might break the fall. I was shouting this at them; I was right up close to the fire; and then I was struck by—I noticed for the

first time an astonishing thing—the flames had no heat in them!

"I was standing near enough to the fire to be singed by it, and yet I felt no heat. The sparks were flying about my head; some fell on my hands, and they did not burn. And now I perceived that although the smoke was rolling in columns, I was not choked by the smoke, and that there had been no smell of smoke since the fire broke out. Neither was there any glare against the sky.

"As I stood there stupefied, wondering how these things could be, the whole house was swept by a very tornado of flame, and crashed down in a red ruin.

"Stricken to the heart by this abominable catastrophe, I made my way uncertainly down the hill, shouting for help. As I came to a little wooden bridge spanning the torrent, just beyond where the roads forked, I saw what appeared to be a rope in loose coils lying there. I saw that part of it was fastened to the railing of the bridge and hung outside, and I looked over. There was a man's body swinging by the neck between the road and the stream. I leaned over still farther, and then I recognized him as the man I had seen coming out of the orchard. His hat had fallen off, and the toes of his boots just touched the water.

"It seemed hardly possible, and yet it was certain. That was the man, and he was hanging there. I scrambled down at the side of the bridge, and put out my hand to seize the body, so that I might lift it up and relieve the weight on the rope. I succeeded in clutching hold of his loose shirt, and for a second I thought that it had come away in my hand. Then I found that my hand had closed on nothing; I had clutched nothing but air. And yet the figure swung by the neck before my eyes!

"I was suffocated with such horror that I feared for a moment I must lose consciousness. The next minute I was running and stumbling along that dark road in mortal anxiety, my one idea being to rouse the town and bring men to the bridge. That, I say, was my intention;

but the fact is that when I came at last in sight of the village, I slowed down instinctively and began to reflect. After all, I was unknown there; I had just gone through a disagreeable trial in New York, and rural people were notoriously given to groundless suspicion. I had had enough of the law and of arrests without sufficient evidence. The wisest thing would be to drop a hint or two before the landlord and judge by his demeanor whether to proceed.

"I found him sitting where I had left him, smoking, in his shirt-sleeves, with his hat on.

" 'Well,' he said slowly, 'I did n't know where the gosh-blamed blazes you had got to. Been to see the folks?'

"I told him I had been taking a walk. I went on to mention casually the fork in the road, the hill, and the plateau.

" 'And who lives in that house,' I asked with a good show of indifference, 'on top of the hill?'

"He stared.

" 'House? There ain't no house up there,' he said positively. 'Old Joe Snedeker, who owns the land, says he 's going to build a house up there for his son to live in when he gets married; but he ain't begun yet, and some folks reckon he never will.'

" 'I feel sure I *saw* a house,' I protested feebly. But I was thinking—no heat in the fire, no substance in the body. I had not the courage to dispute.

"The landlord looked at me not unkindly. 'You seem sort of sick,' he remarked. 'Guess you been doin' too much down in the city. What you want is to go to bed.'"

The man from Fall River paused, and for a moment we sat silent, listening to the pant of the machinery, the thrumming of the wind in the wire stays, and the lash of the sea. Some voices were singing on the deck below. I considered him with the shade of contemptuous superiority we feel, as a rule, toward those who tell us their dreams or what some fortune-teller has predicted.

"Hallucinations," I said at last, with

reassuring indulgence. "Trick of the vision, toxic ophthalmia. After the long strain of your trial your nerves were shattered."

"That 's what I thought myself," he replied shortly, "especially after I had been out to the plateau the next morning and saw no sign that a house had ever stood there."

"And no corpse at the bridge?" I said, and laughed.

"And no corpse at the bridge."

He tried to get a light for another cigar. This took him some little time, and when at last he managed it, he got out of his chair and stood looking down at me.

"Now listen here. I told you that the thing happened several years ago. I 'd got almost to forget it; if you can only persuade yourself that a thing is a freak of imagination, it pretty soon gets dim inside your head. Delusions have no staying power once it is realized that they are delusions. Whenever it did come back to me I used to think how near I had once been to going out of my mind. That was all.

"Well, last year I went up to that village again from Boston. I went to the same hotel and found the same landlord. He remembered me at once as 'The feller who come up from the city and thought he see a house. I believe you had the jim-jams,' he said.

"We laughed, and the landlord spat.

"There 's been a house there since, though."

"Has there?"

"Why, yes; an' it ha' been as well if there never had been. Old man Snedeker built it for his son, a fine big house with a piazza on two sides. The son, young Joe, got courting Mamie Elting from here around. She 'd gone down to work in a store somewhere in Connecticut—darned if I can remember where. New Haven or Danbury, maybe. Well, sir, she used to get carrying on with another young feller 'bout here, Jim Travers, and Jim was sure wild about her; used to save up his quarters to go down State to see her. But she turned him down in the end, and married Joe; I guess because Joe had the house, and the old man's money to expect. Well, poor Jim must ha' gone plumb crazy. What do you think he did? The very first night the new-wed pair spent in that house he burned it down. Burned the two of them in their bed, and he was as nice and quiet a feller as you want to see. He may ha' been full of whisky at the time.'

"No, he was n't," I said.

"The landlord looked surprised.

"I guess you 've heard some about it?"

"No; go on."

"Yes, sir, he burned them in their bed. And then what do you think he did? He hung himself at the little bridge half a mile below. Do you remember where the road divides? Well, it was there. I saw his body hanging there myself the next morning. The toes of his boots were just touching the water.'